

Confronting the Fear of Violence

Violence can incapacitate us through fear. We can choose to be victims and allow fear to control us completely and panic. Or we can choose to confront fear and gain control of ourselves in the face of the powerful emotion of fear. The following steps can help rescue your emotional life from the very real fear of violence:

Step 1 - Allow the Humanness of the Fear

Fear is a human emotion. It is an important survival mechanism that has helped us survive for thousands of years. Fear is an involuntary response to a threat to our safety. Once we notice we are afraid, however, we do have some choices about what we will do with fear.

Step 2 – Acknowledge the Presence of the Fear

There is a strange paradox when it comes to controlling fear. The harder you fight the emotion of fear the stronger it tends to grow. Emotions are like messengers. You can imagine the emotion of fear arriving on the doorstep of your life and announcing its presence by “knocking on the door.” This “knocking” can be felt as a surge of adrenaline, increased heartbeat, rapid and shallow breathing, or a feeling of uneasiness in the pit of the stomach. If we refuse to acknowledge these feelings by denying their presence, they will only “knock louder.” The symptoms of fear either increase or they are expressed on deeper levels. Once we acknowledge and respect the messengers of fear we can begin to have greater control over them.

Step 3 – Determine the Message of the Fear

Having recognized the presence of fear you can then begin to listen to its wise message for you. This message is different for each person. For one, it might be a message regarding the need to take care of some preparation for increased safety. For another it might be a message to pay more attention to important relationships to make the most of them in the limited time we have. Each person can “listen” to their fear and hear the message for him or herself. (Hint – It will always be about some kind of need. You can find this by filling in the blank as follows: “The fear that I am experiencing is telling me I need to _____.”) You can make a list of all the needs that the fear is making you aware of.

Step 4 – Take Action on the Fear

Once you have determined your needs you can begin to take actions to meet them in legitimate ways. Sometimes there are relatively small things we can do, such as having a safety plan. For another person this need may be more life changing. Even a small action in the right direction can help. It can be as simple as writing down a plan and taking the first step. Anything is better than nothing. Having acted on the wise message of the fear

can reduce its intensity. Often times this is enough to give a person enough control over their actions.

Step 5 – Revisit the Fear

It is important to know that this “emotional work” is an ongoing process. New information and new needs can surface in ways that we need to be aware of and respond to. Sometimes the fear can recur as a simple reminder to continue responding in healthy ways. Sometimes we need a deeper understanding of our needs. Whatever the reason, the fear will be something that will likely visit us from time to time just to keep us on track. We can start all over with Steps 1–4 and follow through with further emotional work.

When Fear “Outstays it’s Welcome”

Despite the wisdom of the emotion of fear and the important messages it gives us, sometimes the fear works overtime and can be “reluctant” to leave. Trauma or constant stress can cause our emotions to work “overtime.” Once you are certain you have heard all of the messages of the fear and have done what you need to do to respond to them you may want to try one or more of these techniques designed to limit the effects of the fear and give us greater control over our life.

Practice Deep Breathing

At first glance, breathing may seem overly simplistic. The truth is, when we are stressed, our breathing is fast and shallow. When we are relaxed, our breathing is slow and deep. Deep breathing is a powerful way to control anxiety and fear. Begin by sitting upright in a chair or lying down on your back. Place one hand over your stomach. When you are breathing properly, your hand will be moving in and out with your stomach. Imagine your breath filling your stomach before filling your chest. Take slow, deep breaths. Doing 10 or 12 deep breaths will lower your heart rate and help you gain a sense of control.

Practice Relaxation/Meditation

A daily time of relaxation or meditation has been medically proven to help lower stress and anxiety. This practice is able to lower our “baseline” anxiety and teach our bodies and muscles what it feels like to relax. There are many programs commercially available. Tai Chi and Yoga have also been proven to provide similar benefits. Many find that cultivating a spiritual aspect of life is essential to controlling fear and finding balance. Choose a form of relaxation or mediation that is comfortable to you.

Monitor Self-Talk

Our thinking affects our bodies and our overall mood. The words we say to ourselves in our head can either amplify alarm and worry or they can help to soothe and relax. Pay attention to the “self talk” that is going on in your head. When you notice a stream of

thoughts that are not helpful, you can say the word “STOP!” in your head. Then begin speaking soothing word internally to take your self-talk in a different direction. Affirmations like “I am here now” or “I have everything I need in this moment” are examples of useful phrases to use. Sometimes it is also helpful to ask ourselves a good question that leads our thinking in a helpful direction. Below is a list of helpful questions to give our brains when we want to re-direct our thinking:

1. Who do I love and who loves me?
2. What am I happy about in my life right now?
3. What am I proud about in my life right now?
4. What am I looking forward to in my life right now?
5. What is going right in the world right now?
6. What can I do today to make a difference for the better?
7. Who around me could be in need of my help?

Set a “Worry Time”

“If you can’t beat it, join it! As strange as this sounds for controlling fear, it is actually a useful strategy. Begin by setting a regular time for worry each day. Pick a time when you are not normally productive. Pick a time and place where you will not be distracted. Intentionally worry and fret for a set period of time. (This actually is pretty hard to do and we tend to get bored and think of other things.) During the day when a fearful thought or a worry comes to mind, make a mental note to put that on your agenda for your next worry time.

Challenge Your “Beliefs”

Beliefs shape our interpretation of our world. Many thoughts that cause fear come from irrational beliefs. We can learn to identify and challenge them and take away their power over us. We can make a list of “evidence” that challenges an irrational belief and supports a rational belief. This process is more involved than other strategies but it is a powerful tool in challenging fear.

Stay in the Present

Most worry or fear is about what we fear is going to happen in the future. Once we have done all we can do for our own safety there is no further need to think about fear. Most of what we fear will never happen. If we stop and take a deep breath and remind ourselves that we are fine “in this present moment” we will likely experience a moment of calm and relief.

Get Distracted

Getting involved in something absorbing can drown out the emotions of fear and anxiety. If we can get very involved in doing something we love – that fully absorbs our attention,

playing a game with a child, or working on a project, or dancing – when in a state of “flow” fear and worry goes into the background.

Laugh

Humor is an excellent way to reduce fear. Fear shuts down creative parts of our brain. Humor opens them up again. Reading a humorous book or watching your favorite comedy can be a powerful resource.

Practice Self-care

Self-care cannot be ignored in responding to any emotion. Proper nutrition, appropriate exercise approved by a physician and an annual physical can provide an important foundation for mental health and emotional balance. Smoking, excessive drinking, drug abuse (including medications and caffeine) can contribute to an imbalance and make self-control more difficult.

Call a Friend

Fear can get the best of us at times when we are feeling alone. It can help to call a good friend who is particularly good at managing fear and anxiety. Friends who are upbeat and have a good sense of humor are the best candidates for teaming up with you against worry and fear.

Make a Difference

If we do not like the way things are going in our world, we can do what we can to change it. When we are acting to be a part of the solution we are often too busy to be bothered by worry or fear. We do not have to be Mother Theresa, but we can all work to make a difference in our own community each day.

Gain Perspective through Spirituality

Spirituality is the ability to allow ourselves to be “bigger” than our problems. It is the ability to back up far enough to gain a larger perspective. It is the quest for hope through seeing a larger plan at work in the world. Keeping our eyes on a “greater horizon” can help us be resourceful in the face of our vulnerability and fear.

Consider Professional Assistance

Fear that affects your life more than you want to is called anxiety. If you find that you are not able to gain control of fear through the strategies above, it may be time to consult a professional that can help you identify your needs and plan a strategy for intervention. Managing emotions is a learned skill. It does not come naturally. Like other skills, it can make sense to consult a professional “coach” in the form of your doctor or a counselor to help you as you learn.

Sometimes chronic fear or anxiety is caused by a chemical imbalance in our bodies that affect our mood. Your doctor or psychiatrist can diagnose any medical condition that may be due to this imbalance. There are a number of very effective medications with relatively few side effects that help restore this balance and allow you to live a normal life again. If medication is not an acceptable option for you there are also herbal and non-prescription remedies that can also be affective. Talk with your doctor about what is appropriate for you.

Conclusion

Violence and conflict take an emotional toll on human beings in addition to a physical one. Unfortunately, the history of humankind has always included this kind of conflict. What is new to our time is the technology that has such a great potential for harm. The outer enemy is found in violence and intolerance. The inner enemy is that of fear. If we are to survive, we must learn to manage fear and give ourselves to solutions rather than become a part of the problem. Self-control and the ability to choose how we will respond to the challenges of the present are things that no terrorist can take away.

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Helpful Books

- *The Stress Owner's Manual* – Ed Boenisch & C. Michele Haney
- *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* – Edmund J. Bourne
- *The Feeling Good Handbook* – David Burns
- *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* – Susan Jeffers
- *Hug the Monster – How to Embrace Your Fears and Live Your Dreams* – David Smith & Sandra Leicester
- *No Enemies Within – A Creative Process for Discovering What's Right about What's Wrong* – Dawna Markova
- *Taming Your Gremlin – A Guide to Enjoying Yourself* – Richard Carson
- *Emotional Hostage – Rescuing Your Emotional Life* – Leslie Cameran-Bandler & Michael Lebeau
- *Beliefs – Pathways to Health & Well-being* – Robert Dilts
- *Prisoners of Belief – Exposing and Changing the Beliefs that Control Your Life* - Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning

Helpful Links

- Information about Panic and Anxiety Disorders
<http://panicdisorder.about.com/cs/anxietybasics/>
- Information about Traumatic Stress Disorder
<http://helping.apa.org/daily/traumaticstress.html>